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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the administrative support needed to establish a Reading Recovery program that works effectively at school and district levels. It first establishes three important ideas for Reading Recovery to work: leadership is required; change cannot be accomplished in one or two years; and program effectiveness is dependent upon the effectiveness of the educational program in general and the climate and coherence of programs at individual schools. The paper then discusses administrative leadership and support; Reading Recovery program efficiency; using data to monitor effectiveness; the importance of strong classroom programs; additional support for children at risk; and the formation of school teams. It concludes that the role of the school principal is critical in implementing and monitoring a comprehensive plan for literacy improvement. (RS)

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Getting the Most from Your Reading Recovery ® Program

Noel K. Jones

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Getting the Most From Your Reading Recovery® Program

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Andre was a Reading Recovery success story. A poor learner and a serious behavior problem in kindergarten, Andre was the first Reading Recovery child in our area to be successfully discontinued. Not only did Andre make rapid progress in reading, but he also became a model student. He loved to read to anyone. This tall, intense little boy became the ambassador for Reading Recovery in a system that had just adopted the program.

Many, many children like Andre have convinced teachers, parents, and administrators that Reading Recovery works and that it is a valuable program. However, school administrators continue to ask whether Reading Recovery successes with individual children are enough. "We have lots of children like Andre (or Cindy, or Juan)," said one administrator. "But how can Reading Recovery help us with all the children at our school?"

Making Reading Recovery serve a school or a school system effectively is not easy. Although impressed by changes observed in individual children, educators tend to underestimate the amount of time and effort required to realize the broader goal of Reading Recovery — a significant reduction of reading problems in the cohort of children progressing to the next grade.

This article focuses on the administrative support needed to establish a Reading Recovery program that works effectively at school and district levels. It also examines the need for strengthening classroom literacy and for building collaboration between classroom, Reading Recovery, and special needs programs.

Three Important Ideas

Three key ideas need to be operationalized in order for Reading Recovery to work effectively in a school or system. First, leadership is required — no program will work in a school without administrative understanding, concern, and attention. For example, it is critical that principals realize the importance of bringing children to the training center so the teacher can teach a lesson behind the glass. The entire program is dependent upon teacher professional development, which in turn is dependent upon regularly scheduled lessons behind the glass. Leadership might be defined as supportive actions or decisions based upon an understanding of the program. Administrators who take some time initially to understand Reading Recovery can support it in many small ways without consuming much of their time.

A second key understanding is that change cannot be accomplished in one or two years. Despite the apparent simplicity of the Reading Recovery model, its adoption represents a complex educational change. Revisions of thought and belief need to occur on the part of many people. For example, perhaps the majority of classroom teachers really do not believe that all children can learn. For many years these teachers have seen children fail despite their earnest and sincere efforts. Dramatic changes in children like Andre can begin to shift convictions; but this takes time, and the observation of several cases. Reading Recovery is a re-educating change in terms of beliefs about who can learn, about how children learn, and about how to intervene in a system to foster learning for all. As Richard Allington has told us, there is no "quick fix."

A third key idea is that Reading Recovery's effectiveness is dependent upon the effectiveness of the educational program in general and the climate and coherence of programs at individual schools. Neither a strong classroom literacy program nor an efficient Reading Recovery program is sufficient in and of itself to reduce reading failure; but together they have been shown to make it a reality. Both are necessary, but working alone, neither is sufficient.

Administrative Leadership and Support

Appropriate administrative support for Reading Recovery includes the following commitments:

1. **Selection of teachers** Individuals selected for Reading Recovery training must be committed to the program; able and willing to learn new ways of working; and must be personally effective with children and adults. As an innovation, Reading Recovery represents an investment in teacher learning. It is unreasonable to spend this investment on teachers who may not be capable or willing to learn new ways of thinking and working with children. In order for Reading Recovery to work effectively, administrators must select teachers who want to become Reading Recovery teachers and who will be able to learn and function well in a new program.
2. **Support for Reading Recovery professional development** As mentioned earlier, an investment in Reading Recovery is an investment in teacher education. Reading Recovery learning is psychologically very absorbing and demanding for teachers because it represents new learning and an altered approach to teaching. Teachers who receive encouragement and support from their principals and their school colleagues during the training year tend to acquire the new concepts and procedures more readily than teachers who do not enjoy such support. Involvement in a difficult, risky new enterprise creates a need for gestures of caring and support from people who are significant in their lives and work.
3. **Implementation of the program as intended** The intended implementation of the program is spelled out in the

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Standards and Guidelines of the Reading Recovery Council of North America. This document has been developed on the basis of research and extensive field evaluations of Reading Recovery over time. Permission to use the trademarked name Reading Recovery® is dependent upon compliance with the standards, because these are deemed essential to program effectiveness. The guidelines identify other factors or conditions that strongly influence program effectiveness.

For example, administrative actions are needed to assure that Reading Recovery children receive consistent, daily, 30-minute lessons. In some schools more lessons are missed because the teacher is unavailable to teach the child than because of child and/or teacher absences. Sometimes the school is asking the teacher to do other things than teach Reading Recovery lessons, and sometimes the school involves the child in activities that cancel Reading Recovery lessons. These lost lessons erode program effectiveness in the same way that under-implementation does.

4. **Full implementation** One condition necessary for the realization of Reading Recovery's goals is full implementation, which means having enough Reading Recovery teaching time available to serve all children who need this intervention. One teacher should impact at least eight children per year through Reading Recovery service. If the teacher is working alone in a large school with as many as one hundred first graders, it is highly likely that not all children who need a one-on-one intervention will be served. The teacher may serve other children in classrooms or in small groups during the remainder of the day; however, it is clear from extensive Reading Recovery data that group interventions will seldom solve the problems of the lowest achieving children.

Under-implementation can reduce the effectiveness of a Reading Recovery teacher in other ways as well. Reading Recovery guidelines call for teachers to serve the lowest, most needy students first. Clay's research shows that, while not all children can accelerate their learning and become effective learners with a short-term intervention, it is impossible to predict on the basis of low entering level scores just which children will and will not be able to complete the program successfully. Nevertheless, the lowest performing students in the school tend to be more difficult to teach for a number of reasons. One teacher working alone and drawing the lowest students from several classrooms will usually find herself working very hard and will have many frustrations and much problem-solving to do. Children will be in the program longer, and results will be less convincing to classroom teachers that all children can learn.

5. Active leadership to foster collaboration among Reading Recovery and classroom teachers and to establish a community of learners within the school. (More will be said later about this aspect of administrative support.)

Reading Recovery Program Efficiency

The effectiveness of Reading Recovery teaching will be directly related to the commitment, the understandings, and the problem-solving abilities of the teachers and the teacher leader(s) in the local program. Reading Recovery teachers need to have a strong commitment to their work, believe that all children can learn, become adept in the use of appropriate instructional language, and develop skill in decision-making based upon careful observations and reflections about patterns of interaction over time.

It is also critically important to have available one or more teacher leaders who are able to help teachers problem-solve with the more difficult learning cases. The teacher leader must be able to conduct effective professional development sessions — both during the initial training class and for continuing contact sessions. One of the most important functions of the teacher leader is problem-solving with teachers who are working with hard-to-accelerate children. Most of these children can learn, and it is the Reading Recovery teacher's responsibility to find out how to get learning processes underway. The teacher leader plays a significant role in helping teachers improve their ability to do this. By monitoring the progress of children's learning, she may offer support in a timely manner.

Using Data to Monitor Effectiveness

Administrators need to keep informed of the on-going effectiveness of the intervention program. Indicators of teaching effectiveness include:

- The number of children served by the program. The expectation is that each teacher will serve at least eight children per year.
- The percentage of children whose programs are successfully discontinued. The national average has been 80% of "program children," but the reporting system will change to compare successfully discontinued children to the total number of children served. National rates for all children served have been around 60%; however, training year performance is often lower.
- A relatively low number of children who are referred for further evaluation and some kind of continuing learning support.

If these indicators are not satisfactory, problem-solving may need to be done in one or more of several directions. First, the administrator may want to look at the effectiveness of Reading Recovery teaching. Sometimes the teacher leader and teachers can find areas of performance which they can target for

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improvement next year. Comparison of results across schools may indicate that one or more Reading Recovery teachers are not effective; however, such judgments must be made on the basis of a pattern of performance over more than one year. In these cases, consultation with the teacher leader is the first step. More intensive support for the teacher may improve the situation; if not, a plan to return the teacher to other duties might be considered.

Second, administrators should ask whether classroom teaching is supporting literacy learning for low-progress children. Children who enter school with strong prior experience and consistent home support may be doing well in the school(s), but the teaching may be at too high a level to support the struggling learners. Some teachers, well-motivated by a belief in high expectations, tend to keep these children in materials that are too difficult for them. Learning cannot take place when the tasks are too hard. Conversely, students who are discontinued from Reading Recovery need to be challenged by choosing appropriate books at their "cutting edge."

Another possibility is that the classroom program may be stressing isolated skills with little emphasis on the reading and writing of meaningful texts. In skill-based programs, children who have had rich early literacy experiences and strong home support can fill in the gaps and apply the skills to real reading and writing. But many children cannot do that easily. A familiar pattern among "second round" Reading Recovery children (children beginning their programs in February or March) is good knowledge of sound-symbol relations and ability to write many words, but an inability to read or write continuous text.

The Importance of Strong Classroom Programs

In order to achieve the goal that all children will learn to read successfully, both strong classroom literacy teaching and an effective early literacy intervention are necessary. A fully implemented Reading Recovery Program is a very important part, but only one part of what must be done to strengthen early learning in reading and writing. Reading Recovery represents the primary intervention for the lowest achieving children in the cohort advancing to the first grade. But strong classroom instruction, beginning with kindergarten, is the first and foremost element of a strong literacy program.

If a high percentage of children are entering first grade with very low scores on the Observation Survey (or Instrumento de Observación), attention may need to be given to the kindergarten program, to parent programs, and perhaps to pre-school programs as well. Kindergartens that foster emergent literacy through shared reading and interactive writing can make a big difference in first grade entering scores, even in areas of high poverty and social disruption. Children should enter first grade with some initial concepts about literacy, with a strong ear for narrative "book" language and with a developing awareness of the sound units of language — sensitivity to rhyme, alliteration and growing awareness of individual sound segments (phonemes).

If necessary, classroom programs for all primary children should be examined. A plan should be developed to strengthen classroom literacy programs through a series of effective in-service sessions. The Reading Recovery teacher leader can be a valuable resource to those who are planning and delivering such sessions. However, the teacher leader's time and attention must be given primarily to the task of making the Reading Recovery intervention program work well.

Additional Support for Children At Risk

Another way to support learning for primary grade children who need supplementary instruction is to utilize to best advantage the time of the Reading Recovery teachers for the rest of their working day. In schools where Reading Recovery teachers are also classroom teachers, these teachers can use their knowledge across both settings. This model offers clear advantages.

In many schools, Reading Recovery teachers go into classrooms during this time and teach groups of children simultaneously with the classroom teacher. The Reading Recovery teachers can draw upon their knowledge of specific children as well as their knowledge of Reading Recovery theory and techniques to help other children. An "inclusion" model of this kind does not develop easily or quickly, however. Teachers need to learn how to work together willingly and collaboratively to share their varied expertise and to share teaching space and tasks. Serving small groups of children through a pull-out model can also be effective.

Another recommendation is to coordinate Reading Recovery service with the system of referrals and evaluation for exceptional children's service. A coordinated approach among services — for teaching, intervention, and referral — for each cohort of children who enter a school will yield the best results.

A final recommendation is the development of a plan to monitor and support children who may need supplementary support in grades two through five. Some children who successfully discontinued from Reading Recovery may need occasional review sessions and encouragement from a significant other (e.g., classroom teacher, volunteer, upper grade tutor, or former Reading Recovery teacher). Many of these children are still vulnerable as learners for a variety of reasons other than literacy skills. Some Reading Recovery children who did not successfully discontinue have also been able to make significant progress in grade two with some supplementary teaching. In addition, some concentrated support may be needed for children who move into the district, or for children who fall into learning difficulties in higher grades.

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The Formation of School Teams

Reading Recovery works best when schools accept it as part of their program — as something they depend on to help solve the problem of delayed reading progress. The principal should form a team at the school level to help guide the progress of literacy learning in the school. Membership on this team should include (at minimum) the principal, the Reading Recovery teacher(s), representative classroom teachers, the chair of the "assistance team" (or "child study team" or equivalent), and initially the teacher leader. The team can review decisions concerning Reading Recovery student selection, successful discontinuance, referral for further evaluation, etc. The team can also review data and help others decide why certain actions may need to be taken to strengthen literacy learning throughout the school. The team should approach the task as if they were monitoring the learning of cohorts of children (those of a particular age group).

Summary and Conclusion

To summarize, a comprehensive plan to assure that all children become capable readers and writers by the end of the primary grades will need to include (1) assessment of classroom programs for high-, average-, and low-achieving children, and if necessary, a carefully planned series of inservice sessions focused on early literacy; (2) full implementation of Reading Recovery within each school and within the system; (3) training and awareness programs for parents; (4) school-level teams that work with the Reading Recovery personnel to review program effectiveness and decisions concerning services to children; (5) a coordinated delivery of services; (6) plans to support the learning of children who still need supplementary support in grades two through five; and (7) continual efforts of the teacher leader(s) and the Reading Recovery teachers to monitor and improve the efficiency of their one-to-one tutoring.

The role of the school principal is critical in implementing and monitoring a comprehensive plan for literacy improvement and in making Reading Recovery an effective program at the school level. Administrative efforts towards helping all teachers be more effective are important, but so also are administrative efforts to make their work satisfying, feasible and rewarding. Finally, the system needs to be weaned gradually of the practice of making excuses for children's learning failures. Classifying children as incapable of classroom learning, setting low expectations for them, and failing to supply adequate support for their learning have created the problem of school failure.